

## **ST. PATRICK'S DAY AND THE PRACTICE OF LENTEN ABSTINENCE**

This year, the 17<sup>th</sup> March, the feast day of St. Patrick, falls on a Friday during Lent. We know that Fridays during Lent are days of abstinence from meat. So, what should we do? The Diocesan Guidelines for Lent and Holy Week here in Albany, NY help us as they note: "As St. Patrick's Day falls on a Friday this year, the Bishop has given a dispensation, if desired, to lift the abstinence from meat on this day. Some other form of abstinence, or an act of piety, or a work of charity, is suggested in place of the abstinence from meat." This dispensation has also been given by many other bishops for their dioceses. Abstaining from meat during Lent might also provoke some questions in us, or from our family and friends. Why do we do this? What does this practice or sign signify? Why is it important?

If we reflect further, we notice that we have many practices and signs or marks that are very much part of our Catholic faith and life: not just abstaining from meat on Lenten Fridays! These visible and tangible things remind us that, as human beings, we live and communicate in a physical world and that this also includes our faith. For example, we pray with our bodies: the postures of standing, sitting or kneeling at Mass carry with them a deeper meaning. Most of us join our hands together when we pray. In the sacraments, God uses physical and tangible things such as bread and wine, water or oil, to be the vehicles of something divine and intangible. What is more, we believe not just in the resurrection of the spirit or soul, but also of the body. The same is true of those marks or signs, gestures and practices: we have these things, not as an end in themselves as such, but rather to help us enter into a deeper, spiritual reality.

So, what about the practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent? Where did this come from, why do we do it, who should do it...? First of all, we need to make sure that we distinguish between fasting and abstinence. Both are "ascetical" practices to help bring about spiritual benefits and growth. Both involve food or drink, as well as other things too (such as the TV, the computer or even the cell phone). Strictly speaking, fasting involves reducing and even eliminating what we eat, but abstinence means avoiding or restricting our intake of certain foods. Catholics from the age of 14 to 59 (except where there are health concerns) are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but all Catholics who have completed their fourteenth year are required to abstain from meat on those days and every Friday during Lent.

This practice of abstaining goes back a long way. Some Catholics may remember when the "no meat on Fridays" rule applied on every Friday. Interestingly in England, the practice of Catholics abstaining from meat every Friday, even outside of Lent, was reintroduced in 2011. At one stage, Catholics abstained not only from meat but also dairy products and some forms of shell fish during the season of Lent. This is the origin of having a feast on "Shrove Tuesday" or "Fat Tuesday" (the day before Ash Wednesday) to use up all the forbidden food before Lent began.

But why do we do this? After all, we read in the New Testament that the previous dietary laws have been abolished and that all food is declared “clean” by God (Acts 10: 9-16). Well, there are many reasons suggested for this practice of abstaining from meat. The most frequent reason offered is that it reminds us of how Jesus gave up himself (or gave up his flesh) for us on the cross on Good Friday. It is also, like fasting, an ascetical practice or discipline where we voluntarily abstain from something in order to receive a spiritual benefit. Abstinence acts as a reminder of Jesus sacrifice for us, as we have said, but also of our dependence on God as our true food and nourishment. A number of people also offer their day of abstinence as a sort of prayer for particular intentions. Others follow the practice of abstinence as a reminder about, and an act of solidarity with, so many who cannot afford meat products and who often go without basic food or even clean water. So, as one writer has put it, we may say that while absence makes the heart grow fonder, abstinence makes the soul grow richer!

For more details on the rationale and benefits of fasting, abstinence and other penitential practices, see the USCCB documents: “Penitential Practices for Catholics”, <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/lent/penitential-practices-for-todays-catholics> and “Information on Lenten Fasting and Abstinence” <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/lent/catholic-information-on-lenten-fast-and-abstinence> . One last thing. Have you ever had that sudden panic when you sink your teeth into a burger or other meat product on a Friday during Lent...? If you go to the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops website ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)) you can register for a text message for your phone that will remind you each Friday during Lent that the day is a day of abstinence from meat!

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